

HOUSE ON THE BEACH



Photo by Crannóg Media

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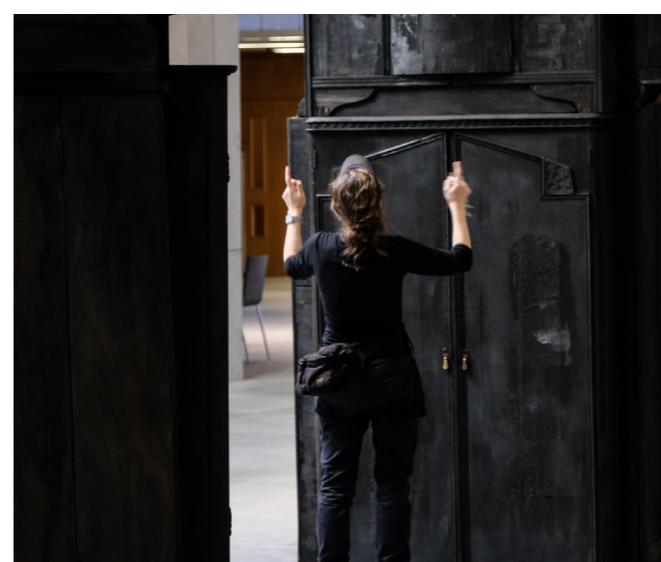
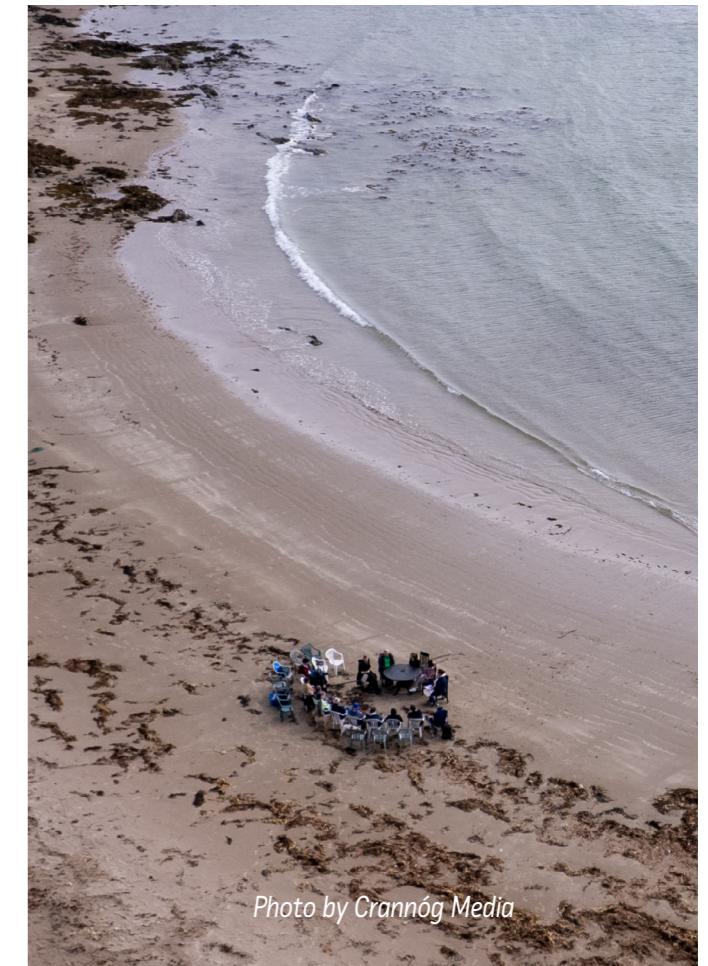
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

House on the Beach set out to create large-scale temporary sculptures of houses on beaches in Antrim and Wexford to provoke reflection on rising sea levels, climate science, and behaviour change. The project was a recipient of the Creative Climate Action grant, an initiative from the Creative Ireland Programme. Mary Colclough in Trinity College Dublin was the project lead, working with artist Nina McGowan and Brink!, a climate agency based in Belfast. Dr Emma Delemere from the School of Psychology in Dublin City University led the behavioural change sessions and evaluation.

Despite significant progress in logistics, design, stakeholder engagement, and community outreach, the original concept could not be realised within the project timeframe, due to Trinity's application to the Marine Area Regulatory Authority (MARA) for a Marine Area Consent (MAC) licence not being processed within the required timeframe.

Instead, the project pivoted to an alternative programme of an art exhibition, creative workshops, and community engagement based in Wexford. This included "Container"- a large sculpture installation for five weeks at Wexford County Hall, public "Talks on the Tide" events on beaches, creative workshops, and behavioural change initiatives.

The revised approach allowed the project to maintain artistic integrity, deliver strong public engagement, and embed climate action themes within local authority and community contexts.



Through events and workshops, the project directly reached over 1,200 people in the Dublin and Wexford areas, igniting conversations around the key themes of sea level rise, coastal erosion, sustainability and the circular economy. In addition, thousands more engaged via traditional and online media.

The experience highlights both the potential and challenges of organising and staging ambitious climate-art collaborations, particularly in relation to securing permissions for public installations.

INTRODUCTION

House on the Beach was conceived by artist Nina McGowan as a creative climate action project, working with Trinity College Dublin and funded by Creative Ireland. The project aimed to illustrate the urgency of the climate challenge by embedding a sculpture of a small house in two coastal locations, north and south. The project sought to combine large-scale sculpture, behavioural science, and community dialogue to deepen public awareness of climate change impacts, especially sea-level rise and coastal erosion.



Artistic vision was central: a charred timber house sculpture, evoking both fragility and resilience, was to be installed on beaches in Antrim and Wexford. Workshops, talks, and engagement activities would link communities to both the art and climate science.



INITIAL ARTISTIC VISION FOR HOUSE ON THE BEACH SCULPTURES

Image to the left is from our original project proposal, illustrating just one example of the extreme erosion happening to Irish coastlines and its affects on locals living in those areas.

CONCEPT PIVOT + PARTNERS



Two large-scale temporary sculptures representing houses were to be installed on beaches in Antrim (Cushendun) and Wexford (Burrow, Rosslare). Extensive planning, logistics and design work took place in 2024, including engagement with county councils, government and environmental agencies and academics north and south, engineering, technology and construction companies, forestry providers, artists, NGOs and community groups.

The material selected was charred wood to symbolise sustainable construction and climate anxiety. The house sculpture footprint was 11 metres wide and 6 metres tall.

An application for a Marine Area Consent (MAC) licence was submitted by Trinity with engineering partners, SISK, to the Marine Area Regulatory Authority (MARA) in December 2024, but a response was not received within the required timeframe.

Partners (consultancy & materials):

Prof Patrick McGetrick - Civil Engineering, University of Galway

Paddy Bruton - MD of Forestry Services Ltd

SISK

Prof Mary Bourke - School of Natural Science, Trinity College Dublin



Focus shifted in early 2025 to an exhibition-based and community-engagement model in Wexford, where stakeholder engagement had already taken place. Nina created three large (5.4m) charred wood sculptures for the public foyer in Wexford County Hall, using second-hand wardrobes which were donated or bought locally online.

Construction work took place in Fire Station Artists' Studios in Dublin and the towers were transported to, and assembled in County Hall.

“Container” was launched in collaboration with Wexford County Council’s Climate Action and Culture Teams on 14th August 2025 and ran for 5 weeks.

Partners:

Wexford County Council Climate Action team

Liz Burns - Wexford County Council Arts Office

Catherine Bowe - Art Curator

Aoife Banville - Engagement Officer

OUTPUTS

ART

Artist and World Champion Freediver Nina McGowan was tasked with creating a sustainable art piece that would ignite the imagination of its viewers and provoke thought about our impact on the climate.

Construction work took place in Fire Station Artists' Studios in Dublin, and the towers were transported to County Hall for assembly.

The installation was facilitated by Wexford County Council's Arts Office led by Liz Burns and working with curator Catherine Bowe.

The three sculptures were dismantled on 20th September and stored in Yola Farm, Wexford, with a view to future touring.

From the European Sustainable Development Week website, August 2025:

"The thought-provoking sculptures lead us to question what we have accumulated in our own homes... In Ireland, we discard around 110,000 tonnes of textiles as waste every year, of which around 64,000 tonnes are discarded as household waste via kerbside collection, the majority being clothing."

"Imagine if something like Stonehenge was made of wardrobes, and you get the idea." - Gemma Tipton (Irish Times Magazine, August 2025)

ARTIST NINA MCGOWAN AT THE LAUNCH OF THE 'CONTAINER' EXHIBITION IN WEXFORD COUNTY HALL
Photo by Claudio Nego



The exhibition was launched in collaboration with Wexford County Council's Climate Action and Culture Teams. It was opened on 14th August 2025 by Wexford County Council Chairman, Councillor Joe Sullivan, who welcomed the 40 attendees.

Suzanne Walsh's essay introducing Nina's large-scale sculpture show, Container, was published for the launch:

"Featuring three 5.4m towers from discarded wardrobes—antique mahogany to mid-20th-century chipboard. Once bedroom sentinels, they mirror human scale amid capitalist decay & ecological loss. Charred, their graphite sheen reveals pre-industrial carbon, a silvery breath from past forests, hinting at immortality. From cave charcoal to quantum tech, this graphite, (a tool for remembering and communicating outside of the constraints of language) asks for cross-disciplinary dialogue... for where logic has failed us, perhaps imagination should be given authority."

DISPLAYED AT WEXFORD COUNTY HALL



5.4 METRES HIGH

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Photo by Crannóg Media



Aoife Banville, local artist who has worked on engagement for several Creative Ireland projects was appointed as project Engagement Officer in Wexford. 20 engagement events and workshops across Wexford were held in 2025 (festivals, schools, community centres).

The complementary public engagement programme with input from the Creative Communities team in Wexford County Hall and Dr Mary Bourke with students Aoibhin Murphy, Kevin O'Leary and Siobhan O'Hanlon (Trinity College Dublin) included:



PRESENTATIONS

Presentations at festivals prior to the exhibition – Hook Head Cycle, Connections Festival (Kilmore Quay), Rosslare Harbour Festival, Wexford Science Café (Wexford Library), Rosslare Strand Summer Festival.



BEHAVIORAL-CHANGE SESSIONS

Six behavioural-change sessions led by Dr Emma Delemere, DCU School of Psychology with students Méabh Ní Fhlathartaigh and Jack Moran.



WORKSHOPS

Targeted workshops with three community groups prior to the exhibition – Maudlinstown Active Retired and Youth groups and Tomhaggard Women's Shed.

“Rising Tides” workshop for teenagers at Wexford Library presented by Anne Kearns, Engagement Manager with the Climate+ Co-Centre, Trinity College Dublin.



“TALKS ON THE TIDE”

4 curated events at beaches with the aim of promoting discussions about climate change. Members of the public joined around a charred table and chairs designed by artist Nina McGowan.

Nature-based Solutions with Jim Hurley, Naturalist, South Wexford Coast Promotions, Clare Kelly, Climate Action Officer, Wexford County Council and Mary Colclough, Trinity College Dublin (Burrow Strand, Rosslare).

Materials, from Wood to Plastics with Paddy Bruton, MD of Forestry Services Ltd, Colm Faulkner, PM with AMBER centre, Trinity College Dublin, and Nina McGowan (Rosslare Harbour).

Water Quality with Colm Ennis, Biodiversity Officer and Ruth Clinton, Water Research Centre and E3, Trinity College Dublin; Frank Burke, Climate Action Coordinator, Wexford County Council, and Nina McGowan (Kilmore Quay).

The Circular Economy with Bonnie Fukumoto, local artist, Paul Bates, swimmer and Nina McGowan (Rosslare Strand).

All of these talks were audio-recorded and are [available on YouTube](#).



Beach Photos by Crannóg Media



TOURS OF ‘CONTAINER’

Curated tours of the “Container” exhibition for three Wexford school groups with artist Nina McGowan (Tagoat National School, Loreto Secondary School and Selskar Community College).



A tour bus brought residents from Dublin's Docklands

All tours and talks were facilitated to enable participants to reflect on the sculptures and consider how we might live, move, consume and manufacture so as to reduce the production of harmful greenhouse gases.

OUTCOMES

MEDIA

The project outputs resulted in an **increase in local residents' understanding of environmental issues and the practical actions they can take**, empowering them to make positive changes in their everyday lives. Our efforts **supported community groups** in identifying barriers to pro-environmental action and explored achievable solutions, while also **building lasting relationships between Wexford County Council's Climate Action team and Trinity staff**, including the Climate+ Co-Centre and the Biodiversity Officer. **Climate action themes were successfully embedded within Wexford County Council's arts and engagement programmes**, and the project **generated new climate-focused creative works** in the form of sculptures and curated beach talks, with potential for future touring and reuse.

PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT IN NUMBERS

2024

900

Direct engagement with groups and individuals across the Republic of Ireland (mainly Leinster), including:

400

Presentation to school students and adults at Our Culture, Our Future Climate Conference in East Glendalough Secondary School

200

Presentation at Visual Artists Ireland's 'Get Together 2024'

750

Direct engagement with groups and individuals in Northern Ireland (primarily Belfast & Cushendun)

2025

262

Attendees at presentations to women's sheds, retired groups, youth organisations and festivals

42

Attendees to the 3 behavioural workshops

63

Attendees at "Talks on the Tide"

62

School children (aged 11-18 years) visited Container and attended the Rising Tides workshop

Hundreds of visitors to Container, including 40 at the Opening

Media coverage for House on the Beach spanned multiple formats from local to national news, including written articles and a podcast interview, reflecting the project's broad appeal and cultural relevance. Together, these pieces highlight the project from different perspectives, extending its reach to diverse audiences and reinforcing its impact beyond the immediate community.

FEATURED PUBLICATIONS

Local

Wexford PEOPLE



Wexford People
August 2025

New Ross Standard
and Wexford People
January 2025

International



European Sustainable Development Week website August 2025

National



Interview with
Nina McGowan on
Moncrieff, Newstalk
radio
February 2025



Interview with
Nina McGowan for
Irish Independent
radio
January 2026



RTE Culture online
(including Suzanne
Walsh's commissioned
essay, "Guardians on
the Edge"
September 2025



Irish Times
Magazine
August 2025

Excerpt from Suzanne Walsh's commissioned essay: "Guardians on the Edge - inside artist Nina McGowan's Container"

Imagine the wardrobe in your childhood bedroom, at night. Or imagine a child in a bedroom at night who can't sleep because the door to their wardrobe is open a little. That faint crack of an open door is distracting, maybe even faintly unsettling.

Perhaps a mirror on the inside shows light slowly fading into another world. Or they can see the faint outline of a piece of clothing on a hanger. The hanging clothes can't help but evoke a figure, a ghost or monster. The wardrobe exudes a presence, scaring the child though in the daytime it seems harmless, an everyday thing. There is space within that dark gap for a thought to grow, a fear, a shadow. A structure built to contain human garments, the selves which are slipped off every day, lives inside a larger structure built to house humans. The wardrobe at night speaks of the uncanniness of these boxes we dwell with and within.

EVALUATION

METHODOLOGY

A structured evaluation methodology was embedded within the project to enable continuous feedback, learning, and adaptation across exhibition design, installation, launch, and public engagement activities. A series of evaluation processes were conducted between May and September of 2025 to examine the impact of the House on the Beach project on climate action and awareness.

A mixed-methods approach was employed inclusive of: **pre-post surveys, individual and focus group interviews**, alongside **written and drawn responses to prompts on postcards collected at project events**.



We used this approach to help us understand the following:

1. Whether coastal communities' connection to their environment (place attachment) impacts their engagement with climate action.
2. Whether the House on the Beach project resulted in changes to climate attitudes, awareness or action.



INTERVIEWS & FOCUS GROUPS

Three focus groups were conducted in-person with community groups across Wexford (42 attendees) to explore their perspectives on a) their relationship to the coast; b) how it impacts how they act to protect their environment; and c) the challenges they encounter engaging in climate action. Focus groups were conducted in person prior to the exhibition. An interview guide was used to drive conversation, with attendees engaged in a creative activity as they spoke. In August, two of these groups attended the exhibition and joined a follow-up focus group to gather their perspectives. Data from focus groups was transcribed and analysed with themes arising described in detail below.

How does connection to place impact coastal communities' climate action?

Community Identity, Pride, and the Moral Expectation of Participation

Participating in the community was seen as not just a practical response to environmental challenges but as an expression of individual values. For many, involvement in environmental actions created a sense of belonging. This was evident in how people described routine activities like litter picking as central to who they are.

'The Dunes Are Gone': Nostalgia and Emotion Shape Climate Awareness

Climate change was contextualised not through science but through emotion and memory. The disappearance of familiar places was felt to disrupt identity, with climate change being a lived experience rather than a distant phenomenon. Participants often recalled traditions and activities linked to specific coastal places with nostalgia, underscoring the deep emotional ties between community identity and place. The erosion transformation of these areas represented a cultural loss disrupting long-standing ways of life.

“...the kids had a wonderful time every summer along the dunes. Well, my son is 39 now. He went back there about two years ago, and he said, mam I brought my wife back to see where we played. The dunes aren't there anymore; the dunes are gone. (T2-P3)

“I go down to the beach every day to walk my dog and it really is, you know, as much as it can be - litter free. ... when they see how clean the beach is - it maintains that kind of culture and it's very rare that you see people leaving rubbish on the little beach. (T2-P17)

Many participants described the differences in key community spaces across their lifetimes. Stark contrasts over time were noted, with places that were once sandy are now rocky, inaccessible, or submerged. The emotional impact of these transformations was especially acute when connected to childhood memories, family rituals or local landmarks.

“But everybody, we had great times down at The Point. People would go out for the day, the men would go down on the flats so they said, so the flats are gone now. But we used to go down there with the boys. The boys would go one way, the girls, the other. (T1-P2)

What barriers and facilitators to climate action do coastal communities encounter?

Focus group results suggest that environmental action is shaped by local pride, emotional connection to place, and a shared responsibility. Motivation for action was driven by a deep personal connection to local landscapes. This place-based care emerged as a powerful driver for both individual behaviour and community-level action.

“
I found a thing yesterday, it was a little goose Barnacle, and I knew it as a goose barnacles, but it was different to the other goose barnacles I've seen before. ... So at 10:00 last night, I was down getting water to keep this little thing alive. (T2-P10)
”

While pride and local initiative were valued, participants also noted the limits of what community groups can achieve without broader support. Several participants shared experiences of trying to engage with public authorities and failing to receive a response. Expressions like “it falls on deaf ears” and “they never listen” captured the exasperation felt when local efforts receive little response from those in decision-making power. A lack of confidence in governmental abilities to support climate action was furthered by the perceived disparity between government and individual responsibility:

“
Why have you still got plastic bottles, I mean why hasn't our government got the balls to say no more, find an alternative... So then, it rolls down to individuals. (T2-P25)
”



Despite these concerns, participants described hope in younger generations. Many viewed education and intergenerational engagement as important tools for supporting long-lasting change.

“
I physically don't think I can go out on the beaches and start collecting stuff. But I have grandchildren, and I have children. So, I suppose it's one step, you can educate yourself and you can do it that way. (T2-P3)
”

ADDITIONAL COMMUNITY REFLECTIONS & FEEDBACK



“
It led to an open discussion on climate change which was good and got me thinking of the environment and any changes I could make.

“
I think this will impact greatly on the community. I see a vision on the horizon, that this will be implemented through creative art.

“
It prompted me to think about my individual responsibilities and actions but they are so small without systemic change that it is hard to see what impact they will have.

“
Provided motivation to change my climate related actions, to pass on to next generation in a better state.

What does the beach mean to you?

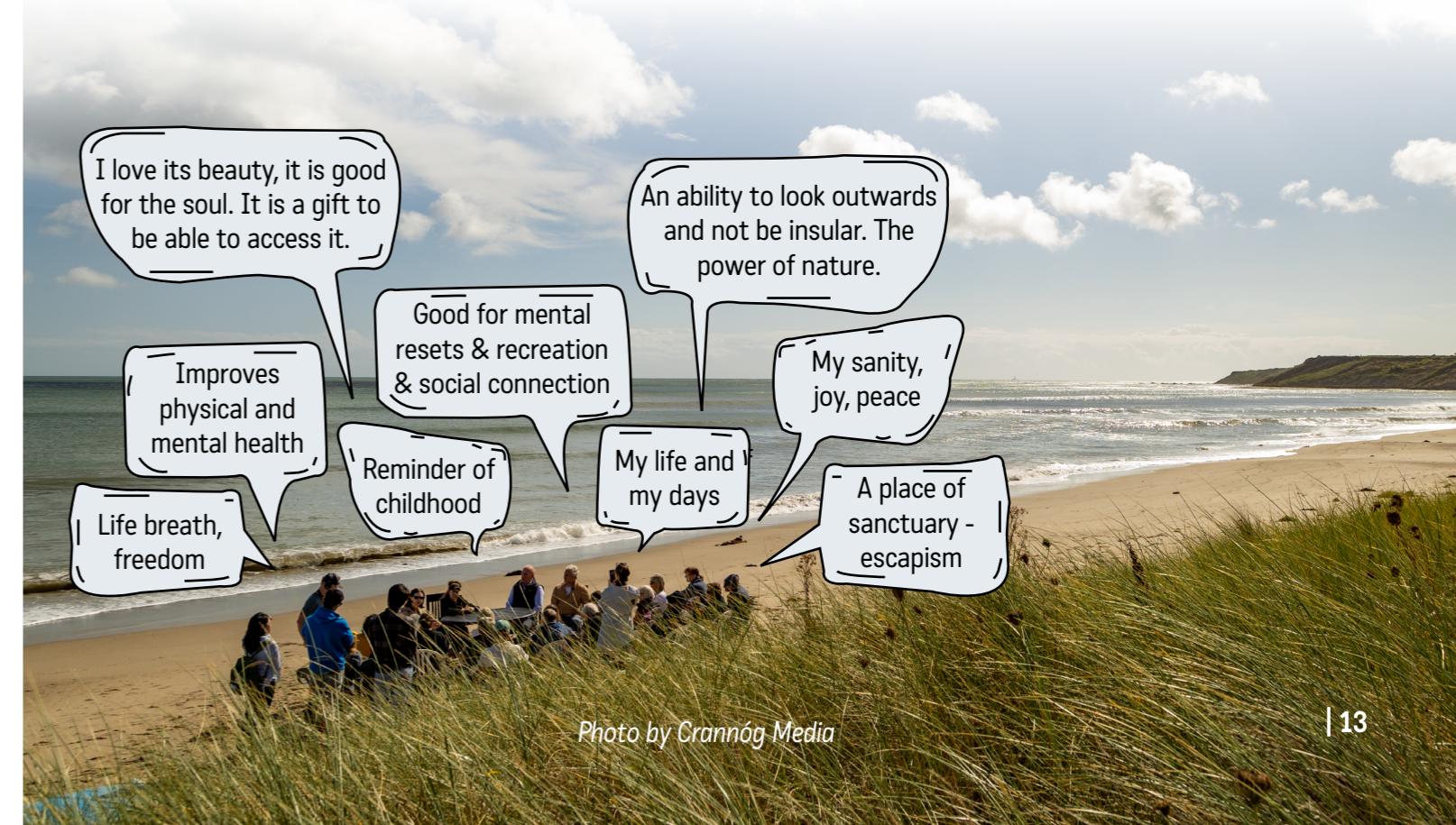


Photo by Crannog Media

SURVEY

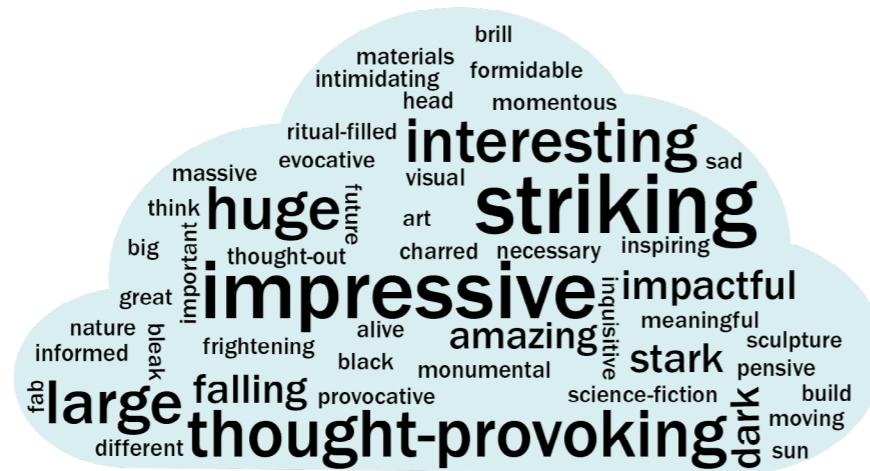
A short survey was conducted to gather feedback from those who attended the exhibition. This survey explored community actions (activities you do, number of groups you participate in), place attachment, environmental behaviours and attitudes, as well as feedback on the project itself.

The impact of the project was examined using the Creative Climate Action Experience Survey – short form (Nyhan et al., 2023). Both online and written surveys were made available to those who attended the exhibition.

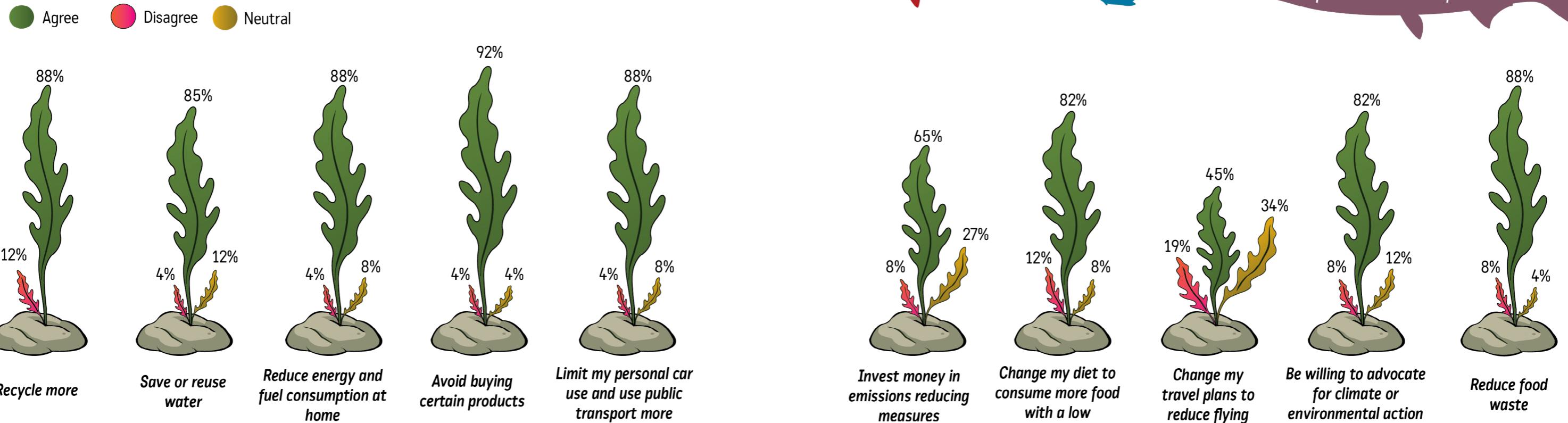
Key findings are presented below.

Provide three words to describe Container:

There were **43** respondents to the survey, all of whom attended the exhibition. Seven also attended the Rosslare Talks on the Tide, four Burrow Talks on the Tide; and six had participated in project workshops.

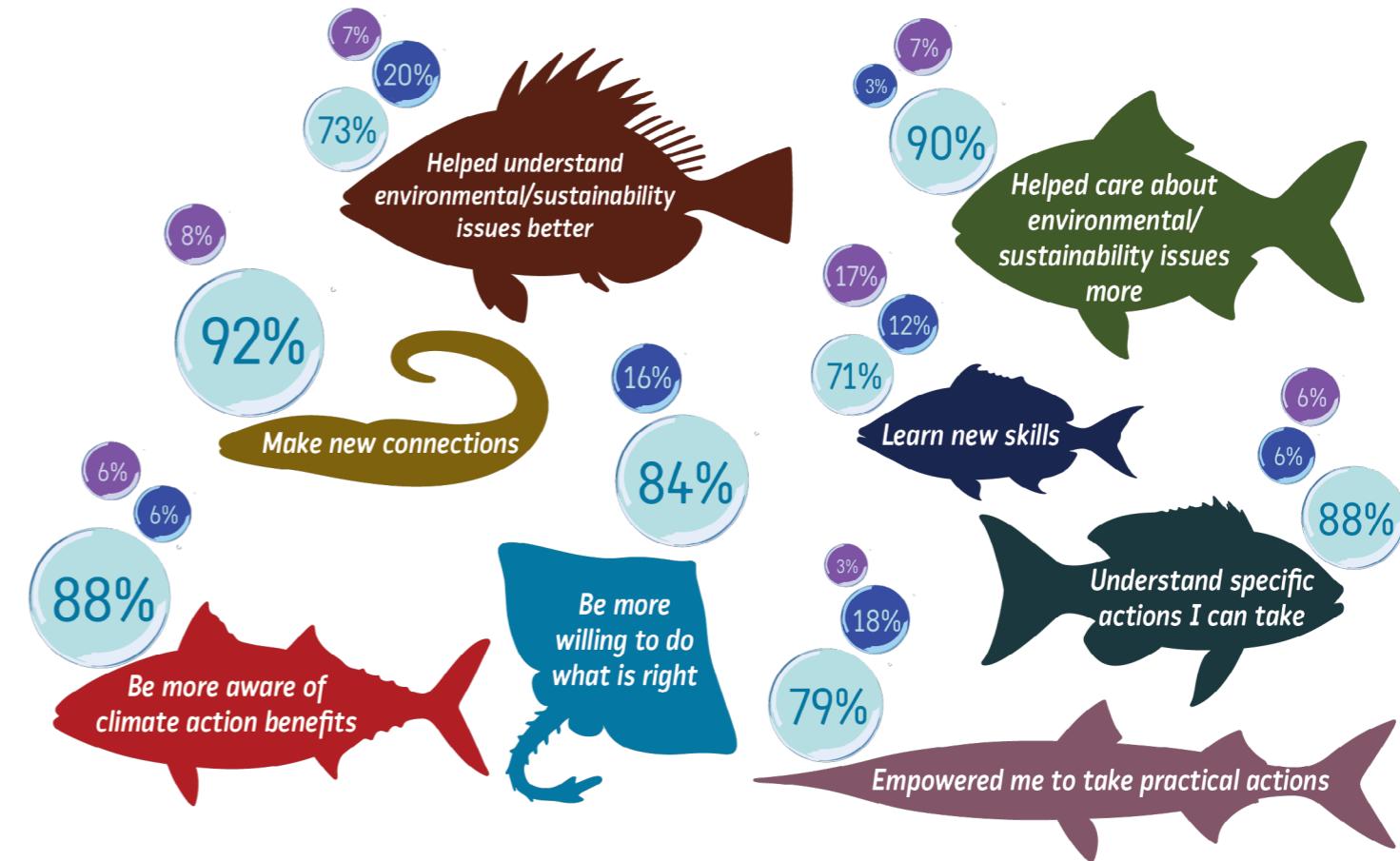


“In the next 12 months I plan to...”:



Survey respondents highlighted that the House on the Beach had a positive impact on their understanding of climate change. Positive impacts on climate action were also reported with most participants noting an intention to engage in climate action over the next twelve months.

Impact of House on the Beach on climate attitude and action:



REFLECTIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

KEY OBSERVATIONS & FEEDBACK FROM 5 STAKEHOLDERS

A number of community, local authority, industry and academic collaborators were engaged across the project, from ideation and planning to installation. **Five stakeholders were contacted to share their perspectives on the project itself**, what went well and what could be improved in the future. Key learnings are noted below.

Worked well

Container was an **effective way to heighten awareness of the impacts of a changing climate** and the need for action. Allowed for members of the community to start talking about climate topics from a shared point.

Art felt to be a good way to address the long-term uncertain nature of threats like climate change.

Great idea behind the project - a creative way to bring attention to an aspect of climate change that is greatly affecting Ireland.

As the project addressed coastal erosion, which is a huge issue for the Wexford community and businesses, **good community engagement and enthusiasm** was built around the project.



Photo by Claudio Nego

Recommendations for future projects

Emotional effects on vulnerable communities: Consideration is needed as to how messaging is delivered to communities who may have experienced the negative effects of a changing climate. As those living in Burrow have experienced flooding of their homes and are still awaiting protective measures to be put in place by the council, they may not be the best group to remind of the threats they face.

Mission creep: Due to the challenges encountered in obtaining planning permission for the original House on the Beach sculpture, the project was tasked with pivoting focus. As a result, there was a shift in the project's concept from what was initially shared with communities and local authorities. It was felt that the project became more focused on art and artists rather than the issue of climate change in coastal areas. While this mission creep was due to regulatory issues, additional consideration of feasibility is needed at design stage to proactively plan for challenges that may emerge while maintaining focus on the projects key concept.

Connect with local authorities/advisors early: As experts in their communities and in delivering climate action initiatives, local authorities are a valuable resource, helping to steer the project in an impactful and meaningful direction. Early engagement is vital, ideally at ideation or application stages.

Link with nationally funded programmes: Consider how the links will be made between nationally-funded programmes, how they are delivered locally and how local teams may support the project.

Consistent messaging and engagement: Some shifting in messaging was noted across the project which was felt to have led to some confusion in what the project was doing and what it was about. There was felt to be an absence of a consistent message to the public that could be easily grasped. In future, projects should make use of local radio and social media, as these were felt to be the most effective ways of engaging with communities. Future projects should consider the communication strategy within risk management approaches if faced with similar challenges in future.

Risk management: Future projects should ensure they have a robust project management process in the beginning and a risk strategy with contingency for possible risks.

PROJECT TEAM FEEDBACK

Reflections

Ambition of original beach installations was central to artistic vision but **underestimated the complexity of planning permissions**.

Flexibility and adaptive management allowed the project to still deliver substantial artistic and social impact.

Collaboration between artists, academics, local authorities and community partners is **invaluable in tackling climate conversations and action**.

Engagement activities **reached diverse audiences**, though participation at outdoor events was weather-dependent.

Opportunities for touring of *Container* to other arts or county council buildings.

Recommendations

Future Planning: Build in longer lead times for permissions and licensing when working with public or coastal installations.

Partnerships: Continue strong collaboration with local authorities to embed climate art within broader community strategies.

Evaluation: Publish findings to inform future climate-art projects nationally.

Resilience: Ensure contingency plans (indoor exhibitions, alternative formats) are developed early for large-scale outdoor art projects requiring planning permissions.



18 | Photo by Crannóg Media

CONCLUSION



Photo by Claudio Nego



Beach photos by Crannóg Media



Through determination and creativity, House on the Beach was able to demonstrate how creative climate projects can still have real impact, even when things don't go exactly to plan. Although the original beach installations couldn't be delivered within the timeframe due to licensing delays, the project's ability to adapt meant its core aims were still achieved. The revised programme in Wexford kept the artistic vision strong and created space for meaningful conversations about sea level rise, coastal erosion and climate action with people who are directly affected by these issues.

Through the *Container* exhibition, beach talks, workshops and community events, the project reached a wide range of audiences and brought climate conversations into everyday civic and cultural spaces. Strong partnerships with Wexford County Council, community groups, artists and academics helped to build trust and engagement, and supported people in reflecting on how we live, build and consume in the context of climate change.

Overall, House on the Beach highlights both the challenges and the opportunities involved in ambitious creative climate work. It shows the importance of flexibility, realistic planning and strong local partnerships, while also demonstrating how adaptive approaches can lead to lasting value. The project leaves behind not only a body of work with potential to tour and be reused, but also stronger connections and a tested model for future creative responses to the climate crisis.

The project team would like to sincerely thank everyone who took part - from community members and workshop participants to speakers, partners and local organisations. Their openness, curiosity and generosity made the project possible.

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December 2025

Photo by Claudio Nego



Clár Éire Ildánach
Creative Ireland
Programme



Trinity College Dublin
Coláiste na Tríonóide, Baile Átha Cliath
The University of Dublin



Comhairle Contae Loch Garma Wexford County Council